

THE MAKING OF A NATION

In little more than a century after the signing of the Declaration, the continent was populated from coast to coast: the year 1890 marked the official end of the frontier. How did the new people who filled the empty landscape adapt? What were the peculiarly American inventions and innovations which the environment produced? How did that environment influence the society that developed from it? This is the part of the exhibit where we have tried to show some of the ways those early years shaped our lives and the nation we know today.

Two hundred years may not be very much as national ages go — but in fact our history reaches far back into the past. Men have probably been living on this continent for almost 50,000 years, longer perhaps, and the first European settlers encountered an extraordinary Indian civilization — one that could boast, among other things, a city of 75,000, Cahokia, near the present site of East St. Louis. (That compares to the size of New York City in the early part of the 19th Century.) The white pioneers not only came into conflict with the Indians, but they learned from them. They wore their buckskins (the 'coonskin cap with tail was, to be sure, a paleface inspiration), grew their corn, paddled their birch bark canoes, and fought with their tactics. This knowledge became an important part of our heritage — as "The Making of a Nation" makes clear.

Most important, the Indian taught the frontiersman the fine art of surviving in the wilderness. But the frontiersman responded with some innovations of his own, what we have described in this exhibit as "the pioneer survival kit": the Kentucky long rifle and the ubiquitous powder horn, the bowie knife, the log fort and the log cabin (Swedish settlers on the Delaware River introduced the latter), and the horse — an animal which had died out on this continent before the first Indians arrived.

The horse came from Europe — as did the stagecoach, the covered wagon, the canal boat, and the railroad. But we used these modes of transportation as they had never been used before to penetrate and open the wilderness. And we added the steamboat, the flatboat, and eventually, the automobile and the airplane. At the same time we came up with a myriad of inventions — many of them pictured in this exhibit — to deal with our harsh but rich environment: the cotton gin, the six-shooter, the reaper, the telegraph, the telephone — even the safety pin.

A new society took shape in no time at all, it seemed. The first cabins in the forest became towns, those towns sprouted factories, and before long grew into cities — generally following the grid plan that New York City adopted in 1811. A rough-hewn frontier democracy developed, too, with its town meetings and its election days that provided an excuse to get together that was as enticing as a camp meeting, a flax scutching bee, a night of quadrilles, or a quilting party.

These are all things that we associate with our country's growing up, and that we would like to remind you of here.

A Assiniboin Encampment
Upper Missouri
by John Mix Stanley

B "The Last Vigil," 1881
by Henry F. Farny

C Blackfoot Indian
in Sun Dance Headdress



Detroit Institute of Arts



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